

# D&D Fiction

## Oroon Rising, Part 5

*by Ed Greenwood*



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### Chapter 5: Tongues Like Biting Serpents

“It’s because we’re out of time that we must send a second force,” Brethniir snarled, bringing one bony fist down on the table with a crash that sent shards of his own bones flying.

Or at least, his words were as close to a snarl as the lich’s hollow voice could come. “We must do anything and everything we can to succeed in what little time we have left!”

The eyeless, cowed mass of writhing worms across the table drew itself up stiffly and hissed, “Lichnee, are you trying to doom us both? Again?”

The lich trembled. “Thing of worms, do you dare—?”

“Of course,” Kadreth snapped. “Always, and without hesitation. I did not become what I am—I did not sit there, unmoving, while worms devoured my eyes and crawled up my nose to gnaw my brain—without having the will to do anything! I dare everything! Never forget that! Yet I also reason, and do nothing wasteful or needless. This sudden notion of yours is restless desperation, nothing more! It will not help us!”

The lich leapt out of his seat, swaying in his dark robes, corpse-light eyes flaring. “And if the Proud Slayers—only three, remember, and one of them that idiot halfling—fall? Is it not sensible to have another band right behind them, to rush past whatever peril claims them, and seize the magic we so desperately need?”

“Another band of—what? The adventurers we just deemed not good enough to send forth in the first place? We cannot give life to a second Jallana, a second Tarlastra—both new and old will go mad, and strive to slay each other more than they mind anything else! So you’d now raise Ransur, despite our shared judgment of him, and have him lead Damryn the Dolt, Thornan Treebrains and that arrogant windbag Halorn along at the heels of the Slayers? He’d put his knife into Jallana the first chance he got, and slay the dwarf simply because her spells make her dangerous to him! That’s better than what we’ve got now?”

“Yes!” the lich roared hollowly, waving skeletal arms. All around him scrying-crystals plummeted from midair to meet the stone floor with deafening glassy crashes, spraying shards everywhere. “I say it is!”

Kadreth abruptly turned in his seat and made several frantic spell-gestures—in time to save a last handful of crystals bare fingerwidths above the waiting stone floor.

When he turned back to face the quivering lich, his voice was silken-soft, almost soothing. “Why?”

Brethniir of the Brazen Tower drew himself up tall. “Because, look you... because...”

The Worm That Walks sat waiting, coldly silent, as the lich struggled to find the right words. And finally came up with these: “Because they’ve never won past the idol yet, and we’ve given them nothing they haven’t had before—except less strength, in boots walking Staelghast. I see nothing to make me think they will succeed where they have always failed before.”

Kadreth nodded, one or two worms dropping onto the table and beginning their anxious wriggings back to rejoin him. “I understand. More than that: I agree.”

“Then why do you oppose me?”

“Opposing and fighting has kept me alive all these many years,” Kadreth hissed. “It’s what I do best, now. It gives me life.”

Brethniir blinked.

The wall of writhing worms that served Kadreth as a face shifted, wrinkling in what would have been an incredulously-lifted eyebrow if the archmage had still possessed eyebrows.

He’d had no idea that liches—who lacked eyelids, or eyes to dwell behind them—could blink.

Silence fell, and in its deepening abyss these last of the Nine regarded each other for a very long time, the table gleaming unconcernedly between them.

The lich moved first, slowly resuming his seat and rubbing his hands together, like a wealthy city moneylender considering a chancy loan. “So if we don’t awaken a second band until our Proud Slayers fall, are you agreeable to us using our spells to send items and warnings to the three? So as to get them as far as we can?”



“Of course. This slow decay into oblivion holds no allure for me. And I’m still human enough—despite my looks—to be curious about what lies beyond the idol. Whoever made it certainly didn’t want wizards to know, or it wouldn’t turn every last little spell sent against it into a backlash. That’s how Orothor the Old died, long before we Nine started thinking about endless days or how to secure them.”

“I thought one of his apprentices slew him by hurling a spell just as Orothor was completing a web of hanging spells, so they all unleashed on him.”

“That was the tale his other apprentice put about, so everyone would mistrust and refuse to aid his rival. Worked well, didn’t it? No, Orothor crafted a sequence of hanging spells to strike at the idol, triggered it, and whisked himself elsewhere to watch the fun—only to discover, the hard way, that the spells that protected the idol sent his chain of magics all back at him. That brought him to the brink of death, his contingencies awakened, and he was snatched back to his refuge—where the spells of the idol somehow marked him as an intruder, so his own defensive spells all smote him. There wasn’t enough left of him even to say for certain which dust-mote was Orothor and which had been a bit of his mountain unfortunate enough to be near him, when he reappeared.”

The lich shook his skull-head. “A fate we court right now, hmm? And how is it you know so much about Orothor’s passing?”

Wriggling worms shaped a smile. “I was the tale-telling apprentice.”

The silence was longer this time.

“So you were Ghlarneth Seven-spell. Once.”

Kadreth nodded at the lich. “Once. And you knew Ghlarneth?”

“For a night. For a time I was Athantra the Enchantress, whom you seduced and stole spellbooks from.”

Silence returned. The Worm That Walks broke it this time.

“Do you want them back?”

The lich started to shake, and a rattling, hollow wheezing burst out of him. It was a moment or two before Kadreth realized he was laughing.

The surviving handful of scrying-spheres bobbed and flickered around them. The lich’s mirth ran out, and he asked, “The Slayers: where are they now?”

Kadreth peered at three spheres. “Well on their way to dying. Approaching the idol.”

Brethniir bent forward to look at the nearest sphere. So intent were the last of the Nine, that neither sensed or noticed the cold, calm gaze that had begun to regard them.

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